

## ***Being Disciples Part II: Developing Alertness and Readiness***

Based on Matthew 24:42-25:13, Mark 1:35-39, Psalm 46:10, & Mark 1:35-37  
A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on April 14, 2024

We began our exploration of Discipleship last Sunday emphasizing the importance of being with Jesus in an enduring and non-intermittent way. A disciple, as Rowan Williams told us, goes to the kind of places Jesus went and hangs out with the kind of needy and broken people that Jesus did. We saw in Week 1 of this series that being a disciple takes us outside our comfort zones, outside our silos of sameness.

Moving into Part 2 of this exploration of what it means and looks like to be a disciple, today we will see that being a disciple of the Rabbi Jesus requires us to develop the characteristic of alertness or readiness. As Rowan Williams puts it, "Discipleship is trying to develop those skills that help us not to miss God, not to miss Jesus...Awareness is inseparable from a sort of expectancy. Disciples are expectant in the sense that they take it for granted that there is always something about to break through from the Master...something about to burst through the ordinary and uncover a new light..." (Being Disciples, p.4)

Williams then uses an absolutely brilliant metaphor for how an expectant disciple goes through his/her life. The awareness of the disciple "is a little bit like that of a birdwatcher. The experienced birdwatcher, sits still, poised, alert, not tense or fussy, knowing that this is the kind of place where something extraordinary suddenly bursts into view...And sometimes, of course, this means a long day of sitting in the rain with nothing much happening...But on the odd occasion, when you see the kingfisher's wing flashing as he takes flight, it makes it all the quiet waiting worthwhile." Williams concludes, "I think that living in this sort of expectancy – living in awareness with your eyes sufficiently open and your mind both attentive and relaxed enough to see the kingfisher as it rises – is basic to discipleship." (B.D., p 5)

All our passage this morning reveal Jesus's way of emphasizing how essential this very same trait is for his disciples. In Matthew 24, Jesus admonishes us to "keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Then Jesus tells the story of some servants whose master went away and stayed away for quite some time. After a while, the servants got lazy. They began to relax, to eat and drink more. They didn't worry so much any more about doing the things the master had asked them to do or fulfilling the master's wishes. And again, at the story's end, Jesus emphasizes that "The master will come on a day

and at an hour when the servants do not expect him.” Therefore, be ready! Keep watch! Jesus says.

Now I always used to hear this story as a kind of threat about the second coming of Christ. But I don’t see it that way anymore. I think Jesus is emphasizing that same state of alertness and expectancy that Archbishop Williams was in his kingfisher/birdwatching analogy. God is so constantly infusing our world with beauty, wonder, and opportunity – whether it is a stunning sunset, a solar eclipse, or an opportunity for us to make a positive difference in someone else’s life – and Jesus doesn’t want us to miss any of these incredible moments.

To double down on this point and the importance of alertness and expectancy, Jesus follows up this story of the complacent servants with the story of the 10 virgins and their lamps. There was a tradition back in the first century that the groom would be led to his bride and the ceremony by a lighted procession. It was an honor for young virgins to be chosen to participate in that procession. In Jesus’s story in Matthew 25, the groom is delayed unexpectedly, and half of the virgins ran out of oil for their lamps because of the delay. But the other half were alert and ready for anything, so they had oil to refill their lamps. Thus, they were able to process with the bridegroom and experience this incredible moment when it suddenly and unexpectedly arrived. The other five who ran out of oil missed out. Clearly, Jesus doesn’t want any of his disciples to miss out on the great moments life brings us.

Last Sunday, when Shelley and I took communion over to Dave and Tina Bowen, we got to talking about the afterlife. Dave and Tina asked me what I thought it would be like. And I said, as many of you have heard me say before, that I think dying will turn out to be a lot more like waking up than falling asleep. And I said that I thought the hardest part of that waking up in heaven would be seeing everything - seeing reality - for the first time as it really is, with no blinders. I told them that in heaven, I believe we’ll see what has always been there – all around us in life – but that we missed because of our many forms of blindness and preoccupation. And I think this is related to what we’re talking about today, because what Jesus wants for his disciples is that we would see ALL that is here for us to see – and to see it IN THE HERE AND NOW! In other words, I think that true disciples – when *they* die – will NOT see a bunch of stuff that they missed all through life, because they lived with their eyes so wide open and their hearts so expectant every day of their lives. That is the goal of discipleship.

This is going to sound crazy, but on Monday, April 8 at 10:05 am, as I was writing these paragraphs and the one about birdwatching, I was looking out my

back windows, when the biggest, most beautiful eagle landed on this tall oak in my backyard and sat there for the next 15 minutes. I froze, set my laptop down, and crept out the back door where I could enjoy the eagle's company for as long as he stayed. An interruption to my sermon writing...? I think not. As Williams puts it, "For me, the excitement of trying to be a disciple has something to do with the exhilarating sense of so many things linking up as God's great narrative unfolds. I'm sure that in reality," Williams continues, "Peter and John and the rest of the disciples were not so very different from us; that is, they had their dim-witted days – but also those days when things begin to join up and they saw a hint of the overwhelming big picture of everything that is being uncovered for them." (B.D. pgs. 6-7)

So, the question for us becomes how do we develop and nurture the capacity for seeing the things God wants us to see in the here and now? How do we hone our eyes, ears, and hearts so we don't miss those exhilarating moments when the kingfisher takes flight or the bald eagle lands on a tree in our backyard? How do we develop what Williams calls "a degree of inner stillness that allows the unexpected world-changing flash of the kingfisher's wing to occur?" (B.D. p.8)

Well, I think that is where our second two passages for the morning come in. In Mark 1:35-36, Mark tells us that "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place to pray." This is how Jesus developed and nurtured his alertness and expectancy. This is how Jesus developed his capacity to be ready and to make the absolute most of everything God would put in his path each day. Let's break Mark 1:35 down; Jesus did 3 things every morning: 1) He got up early, while it was still dark, 2) he left the house, and 3) he went to a solitary place to pray. (Repeat 1 – 2 – 3)

Christians are so good at constantly touting Jesus's amazing miracles, his signs and wonders, his incredible presence in the moment, and his bottomless well of compassion. But what we so seldom is ask the question of *how* Jesus was able to offer all that to the world. How could Jesus do all that...? He got up early, while it was still dark...left the house...and went to a solitary place to pray. Now, if you've been paying attention to any of what I've said about prayer in my four years here, hopefully you know that when Jesus prayed, he didn't flap his lips or list all his wants and needs. When Jesus prayed, he silenced his heart; he silenced his mind; and listened. Jesus's time in prayer was far more meditation and contemplation than what we think of as prayer. As Psalm 46:10 so brilliantly and succinctly puts it: "Be still...and know that I am God....Be still...and know that I am God."

The practice of genuine stillness and silence – both within and without – was absolutely essential to everything Jesus did, and it is equally essential to us if we want to nurture the kind of expectancy and readiness that is essential for true discipleship. When you think about it, if you were the artist who created this incredible world in all its intricacy, beauty, and majesty, what could please you more than people increasing their capacity to not miss any of it? I bet last Monday pretty cool for God, when hundreds of millions of people stopped everything to watch the solar eclipse. But we're not only talking about the natural world here when we talk about developing our alertness and readiness. As Williams reminds us, "We should also look at one another as Christians with expectancy. In fact, the first thing we ought to think of when in the presence of another person or Christian community is: what is Christ giving me through this person or group?... Jesus has brought us together precisely so that we approach one another with that same degree of expectancy. This doesn't mean that you will agree with everything the other person says or does...It simply means that you should begin every encounter by asking, 'What is Jesus Christ giving me here and now?' Just ask that question and it will move you forward a tiny bit in discipleship." (B.D. pgs. 8-9) I think we should be asking that question dozens or maybe even a hundred times a day – every time we move from one location to another, from one conversation to another, one meeting to another, from one window to another.

Can you imagine what life could be like if we lived it with that kind of alertness and expectation? Can you imagine what life could be like if we treated each other as primary vehicles through which God shows up in our lives? "What is Jesus giving me here and now through this person I am with?" "What is Jesus about to give me here and now, as I gather with my community to worship?" "What has Jesus got in store for me now as I go to visit this person in the hospital?" "What is Jesus giving me as this challenging situation comes to me?"

If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, get up early in the morning, when it's still dark, go to a solitary place, where you can be still in God's presence, and ask God to make you ready and expectant, so that you won't miss *any* of the divine opportunities in coming day. Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it MORE abundantly!" I can't imagine a more abundant life than one lived in eager expectation and readiness for the hundreds of tiny ways God is going to show up in your life today. Don't miss it. Don't be one of those poor, unfortunate souls who has to die in order to find out everything you were missing along the way in every God-infused day of your life. Amen.